

The Case for Socialism

FRED HENDERSON



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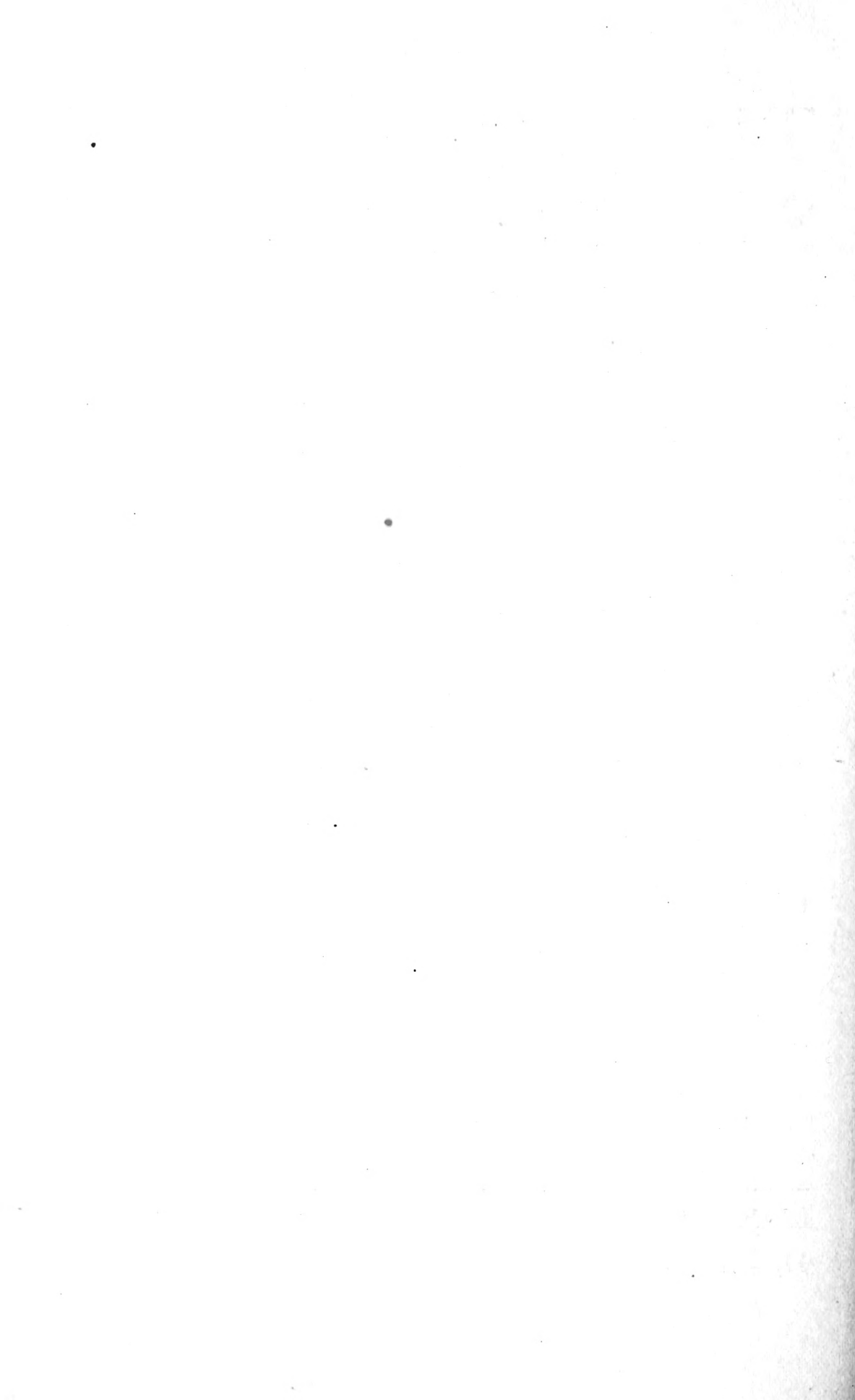
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By
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INTRODUCTION.

ONE of the most remarkable and hopeful aspects of the present great revival of Socialism, and one of the earnestness of its ultimate triumph, is the sudden multitude of capable workers it has called into activity. The older movement in the "eighties" had only a few spokesmen and writers; now one can scarcely take up a local newspaper without finding evidence of capable exponents. Socialism, it is scarcely too much to say, has given men souls, has created minds; never was there a movement so independent of its leaders, so sure to produce men at its need. Here, for instance, is Mr. Henderson, with this admirable tract of his. I know he will forgive my confessing that I had never heard of him until my friend Mr. Gerald Gould called my attention to his manuscript. And here it is, closely and clearly reasoned, persuasive, plain, and easy. Let the reader compare it with Mr. Arnold Forster's recent ridiculous attack upon the Socialist position—or rather, I should say, his recent misunderstanding and misstatement of the Socialist position. Let the reader put it thoughtfully beside the utterance of any contemporary anti-Socialist, except, let us say, Mr. Mallock. There is no gainsaying its superior grip, its force, its conviction. It is one more good weapon for the propaganda of the most inspiring movement, the best-equipped movement intellectually, that the world has ever seen.

H. G. WELLS.

THE CASE FOR SOCIALISM

FRED HENDERSON

WE are told day by day, in newspaper articles and political speeches, that Socialism is a policy of confiscation and robbery. If that be so, then indeed the appearance of an organised Socialist party in English politics is a terrible thing. That a party with flagrantly dishonest aims should be able to command any organised electoral support, and to claim and secure an increasing representation in public affairs, is surely almost incredible.

Now, is not that very fact an indication of the need for studying the Socialist case before you condemn it? An organised political party may grow up round a mistaken idea; and a mistaken idea can only be dealt with by listening to its arguments, and then refuting them on their merits. But a deliberate purpose of dishonesty in politics is another matter; and to accuse hundreds of thousands of English electors of such a purpose is, on the face of it, a rather impudent thing to do. And when it is further observed that this party includes amongst its members a growing number of men of eminence and repute, many clergymen, well-known literary men, scientists of world-wide reputation, one begins to wonder whether, after all, the opponents of Socialism may not be mistaken in their estimate of the nature of its proposals. These people may all be woefully mistaken; but are they likely to be dishonest?

May we not take it that there is a case for unprejudiced enquiry into Socialism, rather than for dismissing it with an epithet without enquiry? I suggest to you—in view of the fact that this question is coming up in politics with ever-increasing persistence, and that it will be your privilege, in the exercise of your citizenship, to express judgment upon it—I suggest to you

that you owe it to the intelligent exercise of that judgment that you should listen to the case for Socialism before you decide either for or against it.

For Socialism claims to be able to explain why poverty and squalor exist in a world of abundant resources. It claims to set forth a remedy for these things. There is no man in England so lost to human feeling as not to wish that these things could be remedied. Have you any remedy to suggest, or any explanation to offer, of the fact of poverty? If you have not—and you know quite well that the orthodox political parties do not even pretend to have any such proposals—then surely a political philosophy which does claim to have got to the root of the matter is a political philosophy which it is your duty to study and make up your mind about. Your study may decide you against it; but in view of the waste of human life now going on in the world, no intelligent man or woman can afford to pass by, without the closest study, proposals for which a sufficient case has been made out to induce a great army of their fellow men and women in all civilised countries to devote their lives to advocate. Is not that fact in itself enough to put an element of hope into your enquiry?

In almost every great controversy, you will find, if you trace men's differences far enough back, that those differences arise from their failure to see clearly some quite simple and primary fact upon which the whole controversy is based. So it is with this controversy about Socialism. Underlying all the discussion about Socialism there are certain conceptions of the meaning of wealth and the nature of property. Socialism is an attack upon the institution of private property in land and capital; and the primary question which must be answered before Socialism can be either advocated or opposed intelligently is: What is the real nature of this institution of private property in land and capital?

Men get into the habit of taking for granted the morality of existing institutions; just as many good men for many generations took for granted the morality of slavery or of religious persecution. The institution of private property in land and capital has been the foundation of organised society for so long that men's conceptions of honesty, of justice, of morality, have all become tuned to it. When they speak of justice and of honesty, they mean regard for the sacredness of this institution of private property in land and capital. All their ideas as to honesty in the relations between man and man are bound up with this system of private capitalism; and it is, therefore, not to be

wondered at that a political philosophy which directly challenges private capitalism, as Socialism does, should be attacked as subversive of honesty and morality.

That is the hard-shelled frame of mind which we have to break through, so as to get men to look an accepted institution fairly in the face, and endeavour to see, clearly and without prejudice, what that institution really is. For what we Socialists say is that this institution of private capitalism stands revealed, once men can be got to see clearly the way in which it operates in society, as itself a dishonest institution, the cause of poverty and of untold human suffering, the secret of the failure of modern civilisation to make human life tolerable for such large masses of people.

Socialism, as I have said, is an attack upon the institution of private property in land and capital. We Socialists advocate the expropriation of the landed and capitalist class; their deprivation of their present way of living; and the organisation of the wealth-producing activities of the nation by the State—that is, by the people themselves—to be administered in the interest of the community as a whole.

I want you to be perfectly clear about this, and not to attempt to shirk the full consequences of the Socialist proposal. Do not, for example, let us deceive ourselves into thinking that we can get round this accusation about confiscation and robbery by talking about some form of compensation to the persons whom we propose to expropriate. If we gave them compensation, in the sense of giving them an equivalent for what we propose to take from them, we should fail in our purpose. Compensation, if it is to be a real equivalent, would only continue in another form the very thing which it is our purpose to end altogether. Definitely and clearly, our purpose is to deprive these people of their present way of living, and to make the wealth which now passes into their possession available for the national life. As a matter of expediency, we may recognise the need for a period of transition during which the giving of some form of compensation to these people will prevent us from fully accomplishing our purpose; but, looking beyond that period of transition, we are definitely working for putting an end to their appropriation of the national resources. In its final consummation, Socialism means the complete expropriation of the proprietary classes; and whatever temporary form of compensation to individuals may be devised for easing society through the period of transition does

not alter the fact that our proposal must be judged by the end it has in view; and that end is the wiping out of private property in land and capital.

This it is which our opponents describe as confiscation and robbery, but which we Socialists believe, for reasons which I now proceed to put for your consideration, to be putting an end to confiscation and robbery, to poverty and its attendant miseries.

Obviously, whether we or our opponents are in the right as to the morality of the Socialist proposal depends entirely upon what is the real character of those proprietary rights of which we intend to dispossess the classes who now hold them. To the discovery of that real character we must, therefore, now turn our attention. We shall, I think, find that it is surprisingly different from what the average opponent of Socialism loosely assumes it to be.

Let us take a definite case. Here, we will say, is a man possessed of a family fortune of £10,000, which passes on from one generation to another. Of course, in actual life fortunes do not remain fixed and stable in that way. They may be increased by shrewd investment, or reduced or lost altogether by prodigality or foolish investment. But such variations are only the accidents of the capitalist system; and to understand anything clearly, you must first of all strip away from it its accidental and get to its essential characteristics. And the essential thing about this institution of private capitalism is that by its means a man is enabled to hand down to a line of successors in perpetuity a way of living without working, having once attained to that position himself. Here, therefore, is one man with a fortune of £10,000. Let us, as carefully as we can, note its characteristics.

The first thing that you will notice about it is that, assuming the continued existence of the capitalist system, there is no reason why the inheriting generations should not stretch out in an unending line into the future. It is a reproduction of the miracle of the widow's cruse of oil. After three generations or thirty generations have lived upon this fortune of £10,000, it still remains intact as a fortune of £10,000 for the next generation; and there is no reason whatever, within the continued existence of the capitalist system, why it should not remain a fortune of £10,000 to all eternity, *notwithstanding the fact that somebody continues to live upon it all the time*. Obviously, there is some process going on here which we must understand a little more

clearly before we can pass on to the next step in our enquiry. For it is not in nature that a thing which is constantly being consumed should constantly remain undiminished. Evidently what these successive generations of men are living upon is *not their fortune of £10,000 at all, but some constantly-flowing stream of wealth coming into their lives day by day; and the £10,000 is only a means of making that stream flow, and remains intact generation after generation to be used for that purpose.*

And here it is necessary, if we are to see our way clearly, that we should diverge for a moment to note one important fact about the nature of the wealth on which the world lives. As we have seen, this fortune of £10,000 remains intact, no matter how many generations may have lived upon it. But it is not in the nature of wealth to remain intact, even if nobody consumes it. All the wealth upon which men live is perishable. You cannot hand down the products of human labour from one generation to another. They begin to decay as soon as you have produced them. Some forms of wealth have a longer life than others, but they are all perishable in the end; and in respect of the vastly more numerous and important forms of wealth it is a very rapid end. At no time is the vast bulk of the wealth of the world more than a few months old. Wealth constantly disappears, and is constantly being replaced by fresh creation by human labour. No generation inherits its means of living from a former generation. The human race lives from hand to mouth upon perishable things; and a slackening of its energies for a single week in constantly reproducing the means of life would inflict grievous deprivation upon it. Suppose that all fresh creation or importation of wealth were to stop in England to-morrow. How much wealth would there be left in the country in a month's time, in six months, in a year? I do not mean by reason of its consumption. Suppose that nobody consumed it. Suppose that the whole population emigrated, leaving the existing material wealth of the country behind. Within a week much of the food supply would have decayed out of existence. There would be a pretty bad smell everywhere. That is what a large part of the wealth of the country would already have resolved itself into. An explorer coming back in six months' time would find decay and ruin making their mark on the more lasting forms of wealth. Buildings would begin to show signs of neglect. Engines would be rusty and unsafe. Railways would be getting into a shocking

state. Cultivated lands would be returning to wilderness. Leave this process of decay to go on for a very few years, and all wealth would practically perish. A few of the most durable products of human labour would remain; but for all the practical purposes of human life the wealth which the departing nation left behind would have ceased to exist.

Now, bearing all this in mind, let us return to our man with his £10,000. We have now carried our enquiry far enough to note two very curious facts in respect of which the property he possesses stands, as it were, outside the operation of the ordinary natural processes which affect all material things. In the first place, it has somehow been transmitted into a form in which it does not decay; and in the second and most miraculous place, it can apparently be lived upon without being consumed. The first of these happenings can be easily explained; but the two together present this thing called "property" to us in a very mysterious aspect indeed. As for a man's possessions not decaying, human ingenuity has got round that by the invention of money and the machinery of credit. If a man produces more wealth than he desires to consume he can pass the surplus on into the current consumption of the world, and receive in return, in the form of money or credit, a token of the world's indebtedness to him for an equivalent at any future time he chooses to call for it. In that way he can make his savings defy natural decay, and justly enjoy in the future that which he abstains from consuming to-day. But the point to be noted is that, whether he consumes it to-day or saves it in this form for future consumption, the final act of consumption, whenever it takes place, ends the transaction, and clears off the world's indebtedness to him.

But in the case of our man with his fortune of £10,000, some mysterious process is going on which enables his property to defy not only natural decay, but constant consumption also. There is no end to it. The indebtedness of the world to him is constantly being paid off, and yet constantly remains. Clearly, we are here face to face with a much more complicated process than the saving and handing down of wealth in the natural meaning of saving and handing down. And, since miracles do not happen, we must look very closely into the facts, and see if we cannot discover what the real nature of this process is.

Let us, by way of getting at the facts, look at the daily life of the inheritor of this mysterious fortune, and see if we can find there any light upon this problem. And here we come at once

upon plain natural facts. We come expecting to see a miracle in operation: a man living upon wealth inherited from a former generation, living upon that wealth without reducing it, eating his cake and yet still having it, in defiance of all known natural laws affecting the durability of material wealth; and, of course, there is no such miracle at all. Here is no evidence whatever of wealth saved from former years and preserved in a magical form which can be used without being used up. On the contrary, the man is living, like the rest of us, in a perfectly natural way upon the perishable wealth produced daily by the contemporary labour of his own generation. He is living upon the bread which the agricultural labourer harvested last autumn, and the baker made yesterday. The clothes he wears, the bed he sleeps in, and indeed all the things which he consumes and enjoys, are all in the ordinary current course of the contemporary production of wealth of the ordinary perishable sort. He is not living upon inherited wealth, but upon wealth which is being produced round about him day by day. *Nor is he paying for that wealth out of his inherited savings; because, if he were, his resources would in due time become exhausted.* Whereas they do not become exhausted, but are there at the end of his life ready to be handed on undiminished to the next man.

We have now carried our enquiry far enough to enable us to see one thing quite plainly. It is clear that what this man possesses, and what he inherits from his fathers, is not actual wealth at all, but *a power of drawing upon the wealth of the world as that wealth is produced from day to day.* As we saw at an earlier stage of the enquiry, he is not living upon his fortune of £10,000 at all, but upon a constantly-flowing stream of wealth coming into his life day by day from the current energies of the world; and the £10,000 is only a means of making that stream flow, and remains intact generation after generation to be used for that purpose.

“The widow,” says Carlyle, “the widow is gathering nettles for her children’s supper. A perfumed landlord, lounging delicately in Paris, has an alchemy by which he will extract from her every third nettle, and call it Rent and Law.”

That is private capitalism—this power of appropriating the third nettle, the third tap of every shoemaker’s hammer; of placing under tribute the carpenter’s saw, the labourer’s work in the fields, and all the activities by which the world is supplied with its needs.

And so we get at last to close grips with the decisive question: How is this power exercised? What is the alchemy, the process by which private capitalism extracts this constant tribute from the industry of the world?

And here I must ask you to follow me as closely as possible, for the analysis of an economic position is never the simplest of matters, especially when you begin, as most people do in this matter, by taking for granted the justice of the very thing which is about to be challenged.

If the human race is to be maintained at all, man must have access to the land and to the means of production. In a primitive state of society, where tools are few and inadequate, man, with land and such tools available for his use, cannot produce great wealth. But as civilisation advances the productive power of the human race increases. Human knowledge and invention multiply man's power over nature enormously, until we get to a point, long ago reached and passed by every civilised community, at which man, having access to the land and to the developed machinery of production, can create far more wealth than is needed for his own bare maintenance.

Now, is it not quite clear that if the nation, acting as an organised community, were to retain control over the land and the means of production, the whole of this surplus over and above the cost of the nation's bare maintenance would be available for the national life, for constantly raising the general standard of living in proportion to the growth of the national power of production?

But if, by some device, you can separate the working nation from proprietorship over the means of work, can you not see at a glance what is bound to happen? Set up a private ownership of land and capital, and you give to the private owners the power of shutting labour out. But if labour were actually shut out the world could not go on at all. The power of shutting labour out becomes, therefore, in actual practice, the power of imposing upon labour the terms upon which labour shall have access to the means of work. Now labour, as we have seen, having that access, can create far more wealth than is needed for its own bare maintenance. Does it not begin to be clear to you that if labour can be maintained for less than labour can produce, then private ownership of the means of production will give to the owner a device for getting possession of that surplus?

Labour, be it always remembered, must exercise itself or starve, and cannot exercise itself without access to land and tools. If you can put yourself into control of the land and the capital of the country, you can say to labour that you will only permit it to come in on your own conditions. You cannot make those conditions lower than a bare maintenance. You may even, by reason of combinations and revolts amongst the workers, have to go a little beyond bare maintenance. But all that does not alter the broad fact that *you can compel labour to accept a great deal less than it produces, and to hand over the surplus to you as proprietor.*

And now I think we begin to see pretty clearly what these proprietary rights really are of which Socialists propose to dispossess the capitalist and the landlord. If a man saves out of his earnings or his industry, he has a right to his savings. The reward of his saving is that, by not consuming all he produces to-day, he can command a corresponding amount of leisure to-morrow or at some future time; and Socialism will fight to the last gasp to safeguard him in that. But if, instead of enjoying his savings in that natural way, he is permitted to use his savings so as to acquire ownership over the means by which other men must live, then he ceases to live upon his savings and begins to live by levying tribute. His savings at once become the widow's cruse of oil, inexhaustible, enabling him to levy this tribute, to extract this surplus from labour for the maintenance of himself and his descendants to all time.

That, as briefly as I can put it, is the economic process which we call capitalism; the process by which, once private property is permitted in land and in the organisation of industry, the proprietor class are enabled to pocket the difference between what labour can produce and what labour can live upon, calling it the rent of their lands or the return on their capital, the obvious fact being that it is simply loot taken from a class rendered economically helpless to resist. It is private property in land and capital that is confiscation and robbery, daily and continuous confiscation, enabling the proprietary class to quarter themselves in perpetuity upon the labour of the nation, to live by levying tribute, by stripping industry of wealth as fast as industry produces it, by stealing the widow's third nettle in the name of law.

Private ownership of land and capital is the means by which

this constant looting of labour is carried on, the system which enables an idle class to divert into their own pockets the constantly-produced resources of the nation, leaving to those who produce those resources only a bare keep. Just so the ancient slaveowner lived on the surplus produced by the slave class over and above the slaves' keep; and private ownership of land and capital is only a different form of slaveowning. It is a means of owning other men's lives, of compelling them to work for less than the value of their work, and putting the difference into the pockets of their proprietors.

We Socialists say that *a sane nation ought to be its own proprietor*, and to organise its industry under its own control, so that its abundant wealth shall be available for the general national life, instead of being drained away in this tribute levied by private proprietors. We say that this tribute-levying system is the explanation, the only possible explanation, the unanswerable explanation, of the existence of poverty in a world of abundant resources. Private property in the means of production sets up a class whose members are fed, clothed, maintained, and provided with incomes, without any effort or thought of their own, at the expense of the general resources of the community. They are not consciously dishonest. On the contrary, many of them are worthy and sympathetic people; but blind, blind to the real nature of their shabbily dishonest way of living. When Bernard Shaw makes one of the characters in "Major Barbara" refer to the propertied classes comprehensively as "thieving swine," he is describing accurately enough the process by which capitalism works, but is doing an injustice to the motives of these people. The fact is that they have never questioned or looked into the nature of their class privileges at all. They take it for granted, as part of the order of nature, that forms of private ownership should exist over the natural resources of the earth, and should keep them supplied with all good things without the slightest contribution on their part. The tribute comes to them in the ordinary course of lawful proprietorship. They never ask themselves what it means, by what process it has come about that they should be born to a livelihood without having to earn it, to sit at the receipt of tribute from the industry of their generation. They do not even realise that it is tribute. They have had their natural judgment as to the true character of things so dulled by acquiescence in a long-established order, that if they ever do

think about it at all they are actually able to believe that they *do* earn their living by the fact of being proprietors and permitting people the use of their land and their capital!! These people, who have never eaten a crumb of their own production, never contributed a moment's effort to their own maintenance, never even wondered by what strange device in the organisation of society things come to them as they do, or how it happens that their breakfast is always ready on the table at breakfast time, must, if they will really think about it at all, marvel at the fairy world in which they find themselves; knowing, as they must know, that no human need is supplied without human effort, and that there must be something queer and uncanny about a social system which pours into their lives a constant and never-failing stream of the products of other people's labour. They will sympathise with poverty, and put themselves to any amount of trouble to alleviate it, so long as you do not ask them to question their own class privileges, or to enquire into the origin of their own resources. And this one thing which they will not question or enquire into is the one thing that matters; the one thing which, left unquestioned, reduces all their sympathy to futility. The whole problem of poverty is simply the problem of getting them off the backs of the poor; of stopping the system of industrial organisation which, by means of the institution of private ownership of the means of work, enables them to live by confiscation and robbery; and of organising industry under public control for the service of the national life, instead of, as now, organising it for the sole purpose of producing this tribute for a predatory class.

This capitalist method of organising industry means the division of society into two classes—the secure and the insecure, the proprietors and the disinherited. It reduces the disinherited to the condition of having to sell themselves to proprietors in order to live; the terms of that sale being that the entire product of the worker becomes the property of the owner, who pays back out of it to the worker in the form of wages a bare maintenance, and appropriates the surplus for himself.

If, under this system, every member of the disinherited class were able to sell himself, if he secured regular employment at what would be called good wages, the injustice of the system, the mere brigandage of it, would still remain.

But it does not work out in that way. In actual practice it

works out so as to give to the disinherited no certainty even of being able to sell themselves, no security against finding themselves at any time unemployed and resourceless. And so you get a wild scramble amongst the disinherited for the bare crust; child labour; women on the streets for a living; and all the widespread ruin of human life that we see round about us to-day under all forms of government, democratic or autocratic, tariffs or no tariffs, Christian or heathen; all directly traceable to this disinheritance of the people from their own means of work, and the private appropriation of those means. We have prisons, workhouses, brothels, full of the human wreckage produced by this system, and a vast population with never more than the margin of a week or two between themselves and the pit, living harassed and graceless lives, their children habitually underfed, their homes squalid and unlovely—people maimed in soul, dull with acquiescence in ancient wrongs. And upon all this we have built up the culture, the daintiness, the sweet refinement of the life of the secure classes. Is it any wonder that, for the more thoughtful amongst them, this decorative garment of culture and refinement begins to feel like rotten rags as they realise what elements of human life and death are woven into it?

That, as simply as I can put it to you, is the Socialist case. Most people, when they say that Socialism means confiscation and robbery, think that they have proved their case when they point out that Socialism means putting an end to certain existing proprietary rights. What I have tried to show you is that those proprietary rights are themselves a system of confiscation and robbery; and in order to establish your case against Socialism it is not enough that you should merely repeat over again what every Socialist admits and glories in—that his purpose is to put an end to these things. What you must do is to show, if you can, where Socialists are wrong in their analysis of the real nature of these proprietary rights.

You will also see the futility of those objections to Socialism which take the line of arguing that we would deprive people of their savings. We are fighting, on the contrary, to safeguard them in the possession and enjoyment of their earnings and their savings. What we would deprive them of is a particular method of using their savings—the method of acquiring power over other men's lives; and we would deprive them of that because such a method of using one man's savings means the confiscation by that man of other men's savings.

And I ask you, in conclusion, to face without any reservations the question of how you stand in this world-combat, to which every civilised nation is now being committed, for the emancipation of industry from this tribute-levying system of private ownership of land and capital. Look round you. Is private capitalism a success? Is it producing a happy world of noble men and women? Is it not, on the contrary, making earth hell for the disinherited classes? The awful poverty, this sacrifice of child life, this existence of myriads of men and women always on the verge of destitution in the midst of abounding wealth, this society in which no day is without its suicides, the conflict and the shrieking of a civilisation essentially ignoble, having no rational purpose, no organisation—a confused scramble of wild beasts calling itself an order of society: Is it the kind of life that men ought to be living, that men in a world amply furnished with all the resources for joyful and gracious life *might* be living? “No,” you say. You will not dare nor desire to defend it. Very well, then, is it not your clear duty to give yourself no rest till you understand what it is that is keeping the resources of the nation out of the life of the nation? The problem is not a complicated nor a difficult one. Its elements are perfectly simple: On the one hand a world of human beings producing abundant resources, and on the other hand something which prevents those resources from getting into the lives of people. What is that something? I have told you what I think it is. If you do not agree with me, what do *you* say it is? And how do *you* propose to make those resources available?

If I were in any doubt about it I could not, with the thought of the present wreckage of human life on my conscience, I could not sleep in my bed until I had resolved that doubt, and seen clearly my duty as a citizen in this matter. Can you?

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